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Getting Educated: LIBERAL ARTS V.S. MOOCs



by Justin Redona

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Creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson presented a TEDTalk [1] on how the current education culture in America is working against the three principles with which the human mind flourishes. These principles are as follows: (1) human beings are naturally different and diverse, (2) curiosity drives human progress, and (3) human life is inherently creative. In other words, in order for meaningful learning to occur in our students, conditions that uphold these three principles will favor their success and perhaps the success of education in America. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) add another dimension to our education culture as an iteration of distance learning. However, learning through MOOCs has its limitations, and whether or not learning is significantly happening is difficult to assess. Under the pedagogy of which MOOCs operate, I believe that the MOOC phenomenon perpetuates our current education culture since certification of obtaining knowledge from MOOCs is measured by how well students perform on tests and conform to a set of standards. A close proximity between the teacher and student is crucial to learning, and we shouldn't be furthering the distance between them—even at the higher educational level. MOOCs, although seemingly novel, will not provide us with the valuable knowledge and wisdom that a traditional liberal arts education may bring. We should be careful to avoid focusing too much on replacing traditional brick-and-mortar institutions with MOOCs if people are to become well-rounded, successful learners. On the other hand, MOOCs possess great potential for acquiring technical knowledge, as most courses are offered in mathematics and the sciences. Therefore, despite the rising cost of college tuition, people should not completely give in to MOOCs as an alternative, because pursuing a degree at a traditional brick-and-mortar institution still has its worth.

My previous article, "Pay Attention, MOOCs on the Loose!", [2] presented a brief overview of what MOOCs are and the implications they have for undergraduate students. I will discuss general implications for professors and colleges and universities in detail later. Courses that are normally reserved for enrolled undergraduates at elite institutions, such as Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), are now freely available to anyone with

Internet access. MOOCs are worth discussing because “well-branded institutions have helped legitimize MOOCs and sparked interest—and apprehension—of many less-renowned colleges and universities.” [3] Although course instructors may suggest that potential MOOC-learners possess prerequisite knowledge, a lack of such background does not prevent people from taking a course. The bottom line is that anyone with Internet access can participate.

This virtually free model of education essentially questions how valuable obtaining a higher education may be to young minds that are in the midst of pursuing a degree. If more people latch onto this MOOC approach, then what will it mean to be qualified among the professions across the many disciplines? The experts of tomorrow that take a variety of targeted MOOCs may be the equivalent of today’s experts, who hold PhD or Master’s degrees. Northeastern University President John Aoun goes as far as to suggest that “MOOCs could result in the emergence of a two-tiered educational system with one tier consisting of a campus-based education for those who can afford it, and the other consisting of low and no-cost MOOCs.” [4] Although this is a possibility of things to come, I agree with the common notion that some people in higher education support: MOOCs cannot fully replace the value of a college education in brick-and-mortar institutions.

Indeed, the college campus with its many resources and expert faculty is an effective learning environment that has been the norm for years. But can a MOOC produce an equivalently effective one? According to Kop et al., “The structure of the learning environment, the place and presence of learners and educators within institutional boundaries, and the nature of knowing and learning are all challenged by the fast pace of technological change.” [5] Information can be transferred, stored, disseminated, shared, and retrieved within a MOOC. This dynamic information flow allows MOOC-subscribers to respond, engage in dialogue, and interact through MOOC platform websites, Facebook groups, or other subject-relevant websites with forum functionalities. As long as students are engaged, it appears that learning should take place.

However, the very fact that MOOCs remain “massive” implies an inability to foster individualization. While it is true that MOOCs can bring together a diverse population of students from all over the world, MOOCs cannot cater to each and every student. Indeed, one of the challenges involved with teaching a MOOC is how to best serve and engage a great number of registered students. For instance, a professor from Harvard Divinity School who recently led an EdX MOOC allowed students to comment on reading material through an EdX website, a Facebook group, and another supplementary website with a forum format. [6] Although this does allow a sense of collaboration and interaction with the course material and fellow MOOC-subscribers, there still remains a large “distance” between the teacher and the student. Therefore, the “massive”

nature of MOOCs seems to be non-conducive to Robinson's first principle for human flourishing. MOOCs bring a flashy, tech-savvy product along other traditional approaches to higher education, but professors and students in the same room seems like the best option in the context of learning among a group of diverse individuals.

In addition to Robinson's three principles of human flourishing, Robert Scott, President of Adelphi University, proposes three aspects of learning in the context of what he calls the current "imagination age": history, imagination, and compassion. [7] Furthermore, Scott supports the idea that a "truly liberating undergraduate education," one that is broad and diverse, "requires a faculty member and a student engaged in learning together." [8] For instance, traditional brick-and-mortar schools that have lecture classes allow opportunities for students to actively engage in learning, whether it be in the form of visiting office hours, asking questions in the classroom, or going to an on-campus tutoring center. It may be true that one can learn history and become imaginative as a result of going through MOOC content. However, this can only occur to an extent, because MOOC platforms control what type of MOOC content surrounds. Perhaps the material is not relevant enough to the MOOC learner, resulting in no strong connection to the material and therefore nonexistent engagement.

This brings us to the lack of compassion during the learning process. One cannot fully become engaged in learning without being compassionate. This is an apparent concept best illustrated by data released by Harvard and MIT during the month of January 2014 after performing a study on their MOOC offerings. According to their study, among the "841,000 registrants for the MOOCs that were offered by these two schools through the EdX platform in 2012 and 2013...only 5 percent of this population actually earned completion certificates." [9] Getting more registrants engaged in MOOC participation is clearly a challenge, and everyone may not be a compassionate learner.

Education that is broad and diverse more aptly lends itself to creating an environment that facilitates engagement amongst compassionate learners. A liberating education achieved through internships, service learning opportunities, and study-abroad experiences contributes to the development of good character, encourages engaged citizenship in ultimately preparing individuals for careers and commerce. [10] Likewise, Barry Schwartz, a professor at Swarthmore College, conveys the value of a higher education when students are prepared to answer four critical questions: (1) What is worth knowing? (2) What is worth doing? (3) What makes for a good human life? And (4) What are my responsibilities to other people? [11] Both Scott and Schwartz view the greater importance of a liberal arts education through brick-and-mortar institutions over MOOC alternatives. MOOCs, in this sense, are only finite, infor-

mation-dispensing online resources for educating individuals at large.

Given the right conditions, it is possible that MOOCs may provide a suitable learning environment. Robinson's second principle for human flourishing is based on curiosity and the third principle is based on creativity. Rather than focusing on the information-dispensing model, sparking curiosity and creativity among MOOC learners may be the best route than simply relying on purely lecture-based formats. Although, close learning (i.e., proximity between the teacher and the learner) is a huge obstacle among MOOCs, incorporating social media and local study group meetings may compensate for this deficit.

However, despite the possible compensations, this downfall might just be the "Achilles' heel" for MOOCs. Robinson noted in his TEDTalk that "high-performing systems in the world...individualize teaching and learning." [12] Close learning requires the individualization of teaching and learning. It is through close learning that teachers are able to engage students, spark their curiosity, individuality, and creativity. According to Scott Newstok, a professor at Rhodes College, "at no stage of education does technology, no matter how novel, ever replace human attention. Close learning can't be automated or scaled up." [13] Even if MOOCs can improve the effectiveness at which MOOC-subscribers learn online, they probably will not be as successful as the traditional liberal arts education model.

The ideal form of pedagogy for MOOCs would need to be dependent on the subject being taught, as not all subject areas are best taught in the same manner. Ideally, in connection with educational psychology, MOOCs seem to best suit the needs of the cognitive and affective domain. The fact that MOOCs are offered on the Internet presents challenges for addressing the psychomotor domain. Therefore, the ideal MOOC would need to address all these areas, through innovative modalities far beyond lecture videos, multiple-choice assessments, and writing assignments. In addition, the subject area itself would have to be enticing enough to draw in a broader student population that would be engaged in learning and commit full participation. Incentives, in addition to statements or certificates of accomplishments, should be built into the MOOC approach to facilitate such engagement. These are all points that I think would improve what MOOCs are today. As it remains, however, MOOCs pose great implications for professors and educational institutions.

General Implications for Professors

Professors are essential components of a college education. Therefore, it is important to consider the relevant issues that the MOOC phenomenon presents in higher education. Viewpoints of professors vary from philosophical disinclination to scholastic stardom. As mentioned before, some professors

who oppose MOOC-pedagogy insist that learning by doing is more effective. [14] Some professors also oppose MOOCs because it might “perpetuate the ‘information dispensing’ model of teaching.” [15]

Nonetheless, beyond the scale of brick-and-mortar institutions, the advent of MOOCs has created a new stage to showcase top-notch professors. Experts, who facilitate MOOCs, may become celebrities among thousands of MOOC-subscribers, sparking inspiration among the masses, and influencing them with their intellectual work. Daniel McFarland, a Stanford University professor, observes, “I want to do anything I can to get my material out there,” and goes on to say that “the more people who have access to it in any form, the better.” [16] However, rather than considering access and quantity as being more important than quality, I argue that MOOCs ultimately hinder individuation when it comes to quality learning. Professors who get involved in MOOCs reach online masses at the cost of providing individual, responsive attention to their students.

Professors may actually end up being more impactful on a micro-level, influencing a finite amount of students, because teaching to the masses on a scale of thousands sacrifices opportunities for individuation. Another downside includes all the popularity among “a few charismatic professors with star quality and platform skills” that may complicate the hierarchy of professorship, possibly rendering mediocrity inadequate. [17] Collectively, this marks a reduction in educational quality, where MOOC-subscribers can be shunned due to the massive amount of course participants, too large for one professor to handle—even with the aid of a few graduate teaching assistants. Unfortunately, any further details on how MOOCs affect the work of professors in the field of higher education is not within the scope of this discussion and will have to be explored elsewhere.

General Implications for Colleges and Universities

It seems that participating universities have taken the stance that everyone ought to be educated. As long these courses are being offered for free with no ties to credit or a degree, elite universities allow themselves to be viewed as offering a philanthropic form of continuing education through MOOC platforms. [18] MOOCs are new services on the market that provide another educational option for current undergraduates. Indeed, MOOCs may be competing for the same market as colleges and universities.

At the same time, they could also be used as a supplemental service in higher education. And as college tuition rises and enrollment increases, MOOCs are bound to gain popularity as long as they operate on a “freemium” model. [19] The current challenge involves infusing MOOCs with a transfor-

mative learning experience to protect major losses in revenue, and any disruptions that MOOCs cause will depend on the willingness of institutions to grant credit for which students do not pay tuition. [20, 21]

In the long run, professors may just become the brand of education rather than the institution itself, and college administrators are worried about this notion. [22] Since MOOC-instructors have the potential to educationally impact the masses, higher education may centralize around professors rather than administrators, placing teachers at the forefront at educational institutions. MOOCs may give professors a greater voice that extends beyond the walls of a university, whereby people view the institutions based on which ones MOOC-instructors are affiliated with. As long as MOOCs continue to offer education as a free commodity, college and university leaders will be scrambling to find innovative solutions as revenues are shrinking. [23]

Education, in terms of a commodity within academia, is a valuable process of learning that culminates in acquiring a tangible credential, thereby certifying mastery of a specific knowledge base. Students and their families have financially invested in this commodity, traditionally. MOOCs alter this long-established view of education as, rather, something that virtually anyone can take advantage of without substantial financial investments.

Conclusion

While MOOCs offer a pedagogical modality that seems attractive in acquiring academic credentials, students should prioritize learning something meaningful over something that will make them employable. [24] Currently, MOOCs are practical for obtaining technical knowledge, primarily, surrounding mathematics and the sciences, as most MOOC offerings are relevant to these fields. However, there is potential for MOOCs to improve the effectiveness at which teaching and learning happens. Everyone including employers, professors, administrators, and students at large will need to be aware of the pros and cons of a liberal arts education compared to MOOC alternatives in order to tackle critical questions surrounding the qualifications and credentials of future “educated” citizens.

Notes

- [1] http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_how_to_escape_education_s_death_valley.html.
- [2] <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=5236>.

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